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ABSTRACT

This study sought to answer the following questions: Are commuting students different from resident students? Are commuters a heterogeneous population? Do trends in commuter concerns from 1973-75 persist in 1976? A sample of 1475 incoming freshmen at the University of Maryland, College Park, who attended the 1976 two-day freshman orientation sessions were administered the University New Student Census, and response difference among three sub-groups were compared: resident students (living on campus in dorms or fraternity/sorority houses); dependent commuters (living off-campus with parents or relatives); and independent commuters (living off-campus apart from parents or relatives). Of the 56 items analyzed, 20 items discriminated between dependent commuters and resident students, 17 items discriminated between independent commuters and resident students, and 17 items discriminated between dependent commuters and independent commuters. It was concluded that commuters were significantly different from resident students, and the two commuter groups were significantly different from each other. It was not found that the two commuter groups were more different from each other than they were different from resident students, as had been found previously. It was found that commuter concerns need to be interpreted from the perspective of commuter sub-groups rather than considering commuters as a homogeneous group. Commuters did not seem to be more disadvantaged than resident students in personal abilities and resources, but some evidence was found that due to lack of access to external sources of support such as peer groups, commuter students may need more supportive services than resident students. (Author/MSE)

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H. Daniel Lea, William E. Sedlacek
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Research Report # 6-77

Sponsored by the Office of Commuter Student Affairs

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Summary

This study sought to answer the following questions: Are commuting students different from resident students? Are commuters a heterogeneous population? Do trends in commuter concerns from 1973-75 persist in 1976?

A sample of 1475 incoming freshmen at the University of Maryland, College Park, who attended the 1976 two-day freshman orientation sessions were administered the University New Student Census (UNSC), and response differences among three subgroups were compared: resident students (living on campus in dorms or fraternity/sorority houses); dependent commuters (living off-campus with parents or relatives); and independent commuters (living off-campus apart from parents or relatives).

Of the 56 items analyzed, 20 items discriminated between dependent commuters and resident students, 17 items discriminated between independent commuters and resident students, and 17 items discriminated between dependent commuters and independent commuters.

It was concluded that commuters were significantly different from resident students, and the two commuter groups were significantly different from each other. It was not found that the two commuter groups were more different from each other than they were different from resident students, as had been found previously (Foster, Sedlacek and Hardwick, 1975b, in press). It was found that trends in commuter concerns need to be interpreted from the perspective of commuter subgroups rather than considering commuters as a homogeneous group. Commuters did not seem to be more disadvantaged than resident students in terms of personal abilities and resources, but some evidence was found which indicated that due to lack of access to external sources of support such as peer groups, commuter students may need more supportive services than resident students.

Commuter student populations across the United States are becoming increasingly large. It has been estimated that 75% of the college students in the U.S. are commuters (Slade and Jarmul, 1975). However, only a small portion of the research dealing with college students is focused on commuters (Graff and Cooley, 1970; Slade and Jarmul, 1975). As schools have become more and more accountable for outcomes of educational programs, there is a pressing need for specific, concrete student development programs which are based upon student characteristics and needs (Parker, 1972). Without a research base, one runs the risk of guessing and hoping programs and services meet the needs of commuting students.

Who is the commuter student? Even through there seems to be some evidence that student personnel workers tend to have negative attitudes toward commuters in general (Foster, Sedlacek, Hardwick and Silver, 1977), the literature is divided as to whether commuter students are a homogeneous population or a heterogeneous grouping of several subpopulations with unique characteristics and needs. Most studies have dealt with commuter versus resident student differences (Chickering, 1974; Chickering and Kuper, 1971; Stark, 1965; Foster, Sedlacek and Hardwick, 1975b - in press); however, some investigators have examined subgroups of commuters based on variables such as race (Sedlacek, Brooks, Miyares and Hardwick, 1976) and marital status (Pettyway, 1968). A common subgrouping has been in terms of living arrangements (Baird, 1969; Chickering and Kuper, 1971; Astin, 1973; Hountras and Brandt, 1970; Ryan, 1970; Foster, Sedlacek and Hardwick, 1975b - in press).

At the University of Maryland at College Park, Foster et al. (1975b- in press) identified two subgroups within the freshman commuter student population: independent commuters who lived off-campus apart from parents or relatives and dependent commuters who lived off-campus with parents or relatives. Their

study showed that commuters were different from resident students in attitudes and characteristics but that the two commuter subgroups were more different from each other than they were different from resident students.

Foster, Sedlacek and Hardwick (1975a) also compared incoming freshmen commuter students as a homogeneous group from 1973 to 1975. The most noteable attitude trend was an increasing concern over the economic state of the U.S. Also related to the economy, fewer commuters were working, and the salaries of those who were working had not increased. Commuters were living closer to campus and more were living independent of parents.

The level of high school academic performance in the freshman commuter population had decreased from 1973 to 1975 even though most achieved grades of "B". More commuters tended to have parents with at least some college education and an increasing number of commuters planned to pursue education beyond the bachelor's degree and indicated vocational preparation as an important educational goal. Although there seemed to be movement toward neutrality on social issues, an increasing number of commuters planned to become involved in campus activities in 1975 compared to 1973. Also, increasing interest was shown in busing service to suburbs and adjoining cities.

The purpose of this study was to further examine differences between independent, dependent and resident freshmen as defined by Foster et.al. (1975b, in press) to determine the generality of their findings.

METHOD

A random sample of 1475 incoming freshmen attending the 1976 summer orientation program at the University of Maryland at College Park were administered the University New Student Census (UNSC), a questionnaire which measures demographic, educational and attitudinal variables. A freshman commuter was defined as an

incoming freshman who expected to reside off-campus in other than a fraternity or sorority house. A dependent freshman commuter was a freshman commuter who expected to live off-campus with parents, guardians, or other relatives; whereas, an independent freshman commuter expected to live alone in an off-campus room, apartment or house or expected to share such residence with someone other than relatives.

RESULTS

Responses to 56 items of the UNSC were analyzed by 36 chi-squares and 20 analyses of variance at the .05 level with Newman-Keuls post hoc tests on significant F tests.

Of the 56 items analyzed, 24 significantly discriminated between the freshman subgroups. When 56 tests are run at the .05 level approximately six are expected to be significant due to chance (Sakoda, Cohen, Beall, 1954). Consequently, place of residence seems to be a significant variable accounting for differences among the three samples. Twenty items discriminated between dependent commuters and resident students; 17 items between independent commuters and resident students; and 17 items between dependent and independent commuters (Table 1.).

Demographic Variables

Of the total sample of 1475, 48% were resident students, 37% were dependent commuters and 14% were independent commuters. (Throughout this report percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding. Any differences noted are significant at the .05 level). There were more male dependent commuters (52%), but more female independent commuters (57%) and resident students (57%). Over 90% of all groups were 17-18 years old and were 1976 high school graduates. The largest proportion of dependent commuters (35%) earned from $1000-$2999 during the previous year,

whereas the largest proportions of independent commuters (36%) and resident students (28%) made from $500-$999. More dependent commuters (80%) wished to work part-time while enrolled in the University than independent commuters (66%) or resident students (57%). Dependent commuters (58%) were more successful in finding jobs than independent commuters (35%) or resident students (32%).

Approximately 70% of all three groups averaged from B- to B+ in high school. In all groups fathers tended to have college degrees and mothers tended to be high school graduates with no college. Most dependent commuters (75%) lived from 6-50 miles from campus; whereas, a majority of independent commuters (54%) lived five miles or less from campus. Independent commuters were less likely to prefer conventional (office and clerical) occupations when compared to residents. Dependent commuters were more likely to prefer investigative occupations (scientific and some technical) than were residents and were less likely to prefer social occupations (educational and social welfare) than were independent commuters. Occupational classifications are based on Holland's theory (1973). It should be noted that 16% of the total sample left the vocational preference item blank.

Attitudes and Expectations of the University and/or Education in General

More than 50% of all three samples chose the University of Maryland as their first choice of schools to attend. Academic programs were the major reasons most resident students and independent commuters chose the University. Location was more important for dependent commuters. Fathers were the most influential upon decisions to attend college for all three groups and University publications and friends were the major sources of information about the University for all groups. Special interest groups were reported as the major extra-curricular interests of both commuter groups as compared to sports for

resident students. More dependent commuters indicated that their parents would not attend Parent's Orientation.

More than 65% of all groups aspired to continue college beyond the bachelor's degree. Independent commuters had the largest percentage who aspired beyond the master's degree (32%). All groups agreed that the major function of the University was first, provision of a general learning environment, and second, facilitation of personal-social skills development; yet the major educational objective of all three groups was to acquire skills to apply to a career. All students showed interest in acquiring work experience before graduation. Even though all groups believed friendships and social life had contributed the most to their personal development, their most likely reasons for remaining at the University and graduating were first, a college degree was perceived as necessary to enter one's chosen profession, and second, the degree was necessary to enter graduate school. All three groups indicated that their families were the greatest influences upon their beliefs. Also, dependent commuters were less likely to prefer a large school over a small one.

All groups indicated that the most difficult adjustment to college would be learning to budget time wisely and study efficiently. Weakest areas for all were math and study skills. Little interest was shown in counseling services, but what interest that was shown by all groups was oriented toward educational-vocational counseling and study skills development. Both commuter groups expected to be more lonely during their freshman year than residents. Resident students were more sure they would remain in school than either commuter group. Of those expressing doubts, leaving to take a job was the most prevalent reason for dropping out according to dependent commuters and resident students; whereas lack of interest was most often cited by independent commuters.

DISCUSSION

The 1976 data indicated that place of residence accounts for a significant number of differences between the three samples. Commuters seem to be a heterogeneous group composed of subgroups with significant difference as posited by several previous studies (Foster, Sedlacek and Hardwick, 1975b-in press, Slade and Jarmul, 1975). However, the Foster et. al. finding that the two commuter subgroups were more different from each other than they were different from resident students is not supported, nor was Astin's conclusion (1973) that independent commuters are similar to resident students, nor Chickering and Kuper's (1971) findings that students residing in off-campus housing are similar to those living at home. In this study, 17 items distinguished dependent commuters from independent commuters on one hand, and resident students on the other; and 20 items separate resident students from dependent commuters. It can not be concluded from this study that any given pairing of the three groups is any more different than any other pairing, but there does seem to be considerable evidence that the three groups are significantly different.

As indicated by Foster, Sedlacek & Hardwick (1975a), Chickering's contention (1974) that commuters are more disadvantaged socially, academically, and personally than resident students is not supported by the findings of this study. Although there were significant differences between groups, 32 items did not discriminate among the groups. All three groups seem to be homogeneous on variables which would distinguish "have's" from "have not's" such as educational objectives and aspirations, vocational aspirations, academic competencies, parents' levels of education, extra-curricular interests and expectations of the University.

This study does indicate that both commuter groups may have need of more supportive services than resident students. These needs seem to stem not from

a lack of personal abilities and resources but more from less access to external means of support such as peer groups. All groups indicated that friends were an important source of information about the University and that friendships and social life had contributed most to their personal development. Dependent commuters, by far the larger commuter sample, expressed much more need to work part-time while in college and were more isolated from campus (75% lived from 6-50 miles from campus). As for preference of residence, independent commuters preferred to live on campus more than dependent commuters. Also, most commuters (both groups) felt they would be more lonely than did residents. For items dealing with dropping out of college and choosing to work rather than attending college, commuters were more inclined than residents to express doubts about college completion.

If commuters do have a need for support as seems indicated, Foster, Sedlacek, Hardwick and Silver's identification of negative attitudes of student affairs professionals toward commuters (1977), is quite alarming in terms of effects upon student development. Could it be that commuters' needs for support are being met in an inadvertently negative manner by University personnel who are usually assigned supportive functions? The seriousness of this possibility certainly warrants more extensive research.

Foster, Sedlacek and Hardwick (1975a) compared characteristics of incoming freshmen commuters for 1973-75 and identified certain trends. Table 2 examines these trends when compared to the 1976 data with commuters subdivided into two groups. A possible trend may be indicated for dependent commuters but not for independent commuters. This evidence further accentuates the need to view commuters as a heterogeneous population with diverse characteristics and needs.

It should be also be noted that the sample for this study is composed entirely of freshman students. Freshmen are not necessarily representative of all commuters. Research on upperclassmen should also be conducted. However, as higher education becomes more accountable for its outcomes, it must begin with a critical look at where students are as they enter the system.

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Table I.

Items Significantly Discriminating Among Independent Commuters, Resident Students and Dependent Commuters

	Independent Commuters vs. Resident Students (17 items)	Dependent Commuters vs. Resident Students (20 items)	Dependent Commuters vs. Independent Commuters (17 items)
Demographic Items	Less likely to be 1976 high school graduate. More likely to desire to work part-time; more have jobs. Live further from campus. Less likely to prefer conventional occupations. Report higher income for 1975-76. Less likely to prefer to live on-campus.	Greater number of males. More likely to desire to work part-time; more have jobs. Live further from campus. More likely to prefer investigative occupations. Report higher income for 1975-76. If working, more likely to have higher income. Less likely to prefer to live on-campus.	Greater number of males. More likely to desire to work part-time; more have jobs. Live further from campus. Less likely to prefer social occupations. Report higher income for 1975-76. If working, more likely to have higher income. Less likely to prefer to live on-campus.
Attitudes	More likely to have doubts that they will graduate. More likely to say lack of interest would be reason for leaving University before graduation. More likely to feel they may drop out temporarily. More likely to have chosen the University of Md. as second choice. More likely to aspire beyond Master's degree. More likely to be concerned about ability to finance college.	More likely to have doubts that they will graduate. More likely to say that a job would be reason for leaving University before graduation. If had the choice, more likely to take a good job than go to college. More favorable toward designing own major. More likely to feel they may drop out temporarily. Less likely to prefer large school. More likely to express interest in CLEP. Less likely to support University recruitment of blacks.	More likely to have doubts that they will graduate. More likely to say that a job would be reason for leaving University before graduation. More likely to have chosen the University of Md. as first choice. Less likely to aspire beyond Master's degree. Less likely to prefer large school. More likely to express interest in CLEP. Less likely to be concerned about ability to finance college.

Table I.

Items Significantly Discriminating Among Independent Commuters, Resident Students and Dependent Commuters

	Independent Commuters vs. Resident Students (17 items)	Dependent Commuters vs. Resident Students (20 items)	Dependent Commuters vs. Independent Commuters (17 items)
Expectations of University	More frequently attend University of Md. because of its academic programs. More likely to prefer combination of large lecture/small group discussion. More likely to see development of personal-social skills as major function of the University. More likely to show interest in extra curricular special interest groups. More likely to expect loneliness during freshman year. More frequently expect parents to attend Parents' Orientation.	More frequently attend University of Md. because of its location; less frequently because of its academic programs. More likely to prefer lab courses. More likely to see job preparation as major function of the University. More likely to show interest in extra curricular special interest groups. More likely to expect loneliness during freshman year. Less frequently expect parents to attend Parents' Orientation.	More frequently attend University of Md. because of its location and low cost; less frequently because of its academic programs. More likely to prefer lab courses and independent study. More likely to see job preparation as major function of the University. Less frequently expect parents to attend Parents' Orientation.

Table 2.

Commuter Trends For 1973-1975 Compared to 1976 Data
For Independent and Dependent Commuters

Trends in Commuter Characteristics for a Three-Year Period, 1973-75*	Continuance of Trends in 1976 Data: Independent Commuters	Continuance of Trends in 1976 Data: Dependent Commuters
1. Increasing concern over economy.	No	No
2. Decreasing interest in ecology.	No	Yes
3. Decreasing interest in racism.	Yes	Yes
4. Plan to reside closer to campus.	Yes	No
5. Fewer expect to be dependent.	Yes	Yes
6. More expect to be independent	Yes	Yes
7. Increase in proportion who would like to work.	Yes	No
8. More than 90% earned less than $3000 per year in previous year.	Yes	Yes
9. Majority have B average.	Yes	Yes
10. Less A averages.	Yes	Yes
11. More fathers with college degrees.	Yes	Yes
12. More mothers with college degrees.	Yes	Yes
13. University of Md. was first choice.	No	Yes
14. Location was most important reason for choosing University of Md.	No	Yes
15. Academic programs increasingly important for choosing University of Md.	Yes	Yes
16. Fathers the most important influence on choice to go to college.	No	Yes
17. Friends becoming more influential on choice to go to college.	Yes	Yes
18. Expect to earn at least B.A.	Yes	Yes
19. Tend to go beyond B.A.	Yes	Yes
20. Educational objective "skills for a career."	Yes	Yes
21. More interest in careers working with people.	No	Yes
22. University should provide general learning facility.	Yes	Yes
23. University should prepare people for jobs.	No	Yes
24. College only way to enter chosen profession.	Yes	Yes
25. Social life contributes most to development.	Yes	Yes
26. Concern over studying efficiently.	Yes	Yes
27. Concern over budgeting time.	Yes	Yes
28. Provide higher education for blacks by natural processes.	Yes	Yes
29. Neutral to University recruitment of blacks.	Yes	Yes
30. University should use its influence to change social conditions in State.	Yes	Yes.

*Foster, Sedlacek and Hardwick (1975a)